

PALM SUNDAY

Today we begin Holy Week. In ancient times this was known as the Great Week. The Passion narratives come to life as if enacted before our very eyes. Step by step we follow the path Christ trod during the last days of His mortal life.

Like the people of Jerusalem, we too joyfully acclaim Christ as our King. He enters the Holy City not as a warrior King with a great army, but as a humble and gentle Messiah 'humble and riding on a donkey' (Zachariah 9:19). The donkey was regarded as a beast of burden. Christ, as it were, does the 'donkey work' for us. He takes upon Himself the burden and guilt of our sins and carries them in His sacred Passion. It is also worth noting that in ancient times it was customary for a King to ride on a donkey when on a mission of peace whereas the horse carried Kings into battle. In this sense Christ, the King will bring peace to those who make a place for him in their hearts and follow Him with humility. But peace will only be ours if, as subjects of His Kingdom, we live by the Truth. As the gospel relates 'all who are on the side of Truth listen to His voice'.

The procession of palms is not just pageantry - we follow Christ with a lively devotion. Even today the triumph of Easter is foreshadowed - the palm being an emblem of that victory. The Book of Revelation tells us that the saints in Heaven hold palm branches in their hands. So we don't just look back at a past event. The opening prayer of the Mass says it all. When our life on earth is over 'may we follow Christ into the new and everlasting Jerusalem of Heaven.'

The First Reading from the Book of Isaiah, written 800 years before Christ, speaks about a mysterious Suffering Servant whose sufferings prefigures those of Christ. The humility of Christ in accepting insult and derision is underscored in the First and second Readings. 'He did not cover his face against insult and spittle'. 'He emptied himself to assume the condition of a slave'.

The Gospel this year is the story of the Passion from Mark - it never fails to make a deep impression. As we enter into the story we can imagine ourselves on Mount Calvary witnessing Christ's terrible suffering and death for ourselves.

The question is: If I were on Calvary that day, what effect might it have on me? What would my reaction be to what was taking place that first Good Friday? The answer is straightforward - where do I stand now? If I am stuck 'in the rut of sin' and am not doing anything about it, then I will keep my distance from the Cross of Jesus. It says that many people among the onlookers 'went home beating their breasts'. Do I believe that my sins had a part to play in putting Jesus on the Cross? Would I beat my breast and descend from the mountain a rather chastened man or woman? Does the message of Calvary find a real home in my heart? Or am I like most of the crowd that day just there for the spectacle but unmoved in any deep down sense. Or does the death of Christ out of love for humanity give meaning to my life on Earth and prepare me for Paradise which the real goal of my existence.